



It's a

Secret
Everybody

to

Tevis Thompson

It's a Secret to Everybody

Running got boring after a while. And Sam was tired of winning. So they made an obstacle course.

They made it where the new houses were going up. Behind their subdivision, another was being built – but without a connecting street, its entrance miles away. They pinched loose materials there that came in bundles and stacks and might go uncounted. From one house that was all frames (wooden bars for walls you could easily pass through), they snagged loose beams and small piles of bricks left sunken in the mud. From another that looked nearly finished, they collected unplanted shrubs and a series of cardboard boxes labeled with brown question marks. The boxes were empty except for a few stray coins.

They dragged everything to a third lot where a foundation was just being laid. The land there was pitted with fresh holes, and cracked cinder blocks formed a broken path along a ridge. They arranged the collected items, propping up the boxes with bricks and beams and placing the bushes in empty spaces for decoration. A few exposed green pipes already on the path would force the runners to jump, and a huge mound of earth at the end would demand a final scramble before they could reach the flagpole swiped from the golf course nearby.

It looked better than they'd imagined. Sam was ready for the new challenge. Justin, constant runner-up, loved *Ninja Warrior* and thought this'd give him a definite advantage. He was also a natural born cheater and always angling for an easy win, especially against a younger girl who embarrassed him so easily. The worst part was Sam's refusal to gloat. She never enjoyed her victory. She was always so cold and smug.

Sam and Justin crouched at the beginning of the obstacle course. Beside them, Cleveland signaled to Maddy at the flagpole to make sure everything was ready. Maddy nodded. Clouds hung in their place overhead, and lone rounded hills in the static background longed to parallax. They began.

Sam leapt ahead, as usual. She ducked beneath the boxes and bounded over the first pipe. Justin, imagining crowds of thin-armed, big-eyed Japanese girls gazing upon him instead of pudgy, squinting Cleveland, barreled forward and smashed a stack of loose bricks they'd so carefully placed for support. He focused on the high, rounded shoulders of Sam's orange-yellow jacket disappearing beyond the first pipe and then stumbled over a thick clump of ugly mushrooms. He was already feeling smaller just seconds in.

Sam cleared the first three pipes but stopped at the fourth. She wasn't sure why. Something seemed to tickle and crawl over her brain. The top of the fourth pipe shimmered, like the edge of an asphalt horizon on the highway. Her skull buzzed and hummed and she leaned back.

Justin tumbled past, but nobody noticed. Maddy and Cleveland were already converging on Sam

in the middle. No one saw Justin leap over the remaining pipes and pits. No one watched him fumble up the final hill or grasp the flagpole, nearly cracking it in half. No one noticed his lopsided attempt at a smug smile, one he'd practiced in the mirror the night before. He was too shocked himself to pull it off.

"I won one! I finally won one!" But all they heard was "Won one", as if he were misreading eleven.

Maddy wrinkled her nose but didn't look. "Justin Bailey, you zero sum."

"What is it, Sam?" Cleveland edged closer. He studied the large, rustless pipe, but it was just a pipe.

Sam reached out but didn't touch it. Maddy went up and thumped the pipe with two knuckles. "Youwho?"

Cleveland hushed Maddy with his eyes, but she went on. "You just let Justin think he won. I can't listen to that diddler brag all year."

Later, they told Sam's twin sister, Z, all about the course, the pipe, and Justin's slinking away before Maddy could demand a rematch. Z stared out the window, and they weren't sure if she was listening, as usual.

Finally, she said, "I'd like to see it."

"She speaks," Maddy said.

But it was already late, and Maddy and Cleveland had to go, and Sam and Z's mom would be up soon. The next day, Cleveland saw the construction workers hauling the bricks and boxes back to where they belonged. They connected the open pipes and later buried them in the floors and walls of a new house.

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Sam didn't think much about the pipe again until a few weeks later when she snuck through her mother's bedroom. The afternoon light fell through the blinds in thin strips. Sam edged along the wall and tracked the dust winking in and out beside the bed. She tried not to scan her mother heaped upon it. She backed into her parents' bathroom, strictly forbidden, and reached into the cabinet beneath the sink without looking. Her fingers found a half-gone roll of toilet paper.

She felt the buzz and hum again. She was sure the shimmer would be there too. But then her mother turned and said, "Daughter."

Sam raised the toilet paper roll and telescoped her. She wasn't sure her mother was truly awake. She fixed the circle around her mother's eye peering out from the covers and pressed the other

end around her own, hard.

“Come here.”

She kept the tube between them and trudged forward. Her toes flailed for some hold between the tiles, but the grout had hardened years ago. She stepped out onto the carpet and noticed a strange smell hovering near the bed. Then her dad walked in.

“Sammy, what are you doing in here?”

Sam raised the toilet roll in reply and dashed out. She glanced back to see her dad kneel by the bed and gently whisper words she could not make out.

Sam told her sister about the bathroom. Z looked up from her book. “I wish I had my own phone booth like Jeremy. This,” she pointed at her slim purple cell phone, “is too small. And too moveable.”

Sam waited til Z returned. “Will you help me?”

“Of course.”

They lingered in the hall until their dad began to fix dinner and their mother joined him. She usually seemed to feel better while sitting at the kitchen table chatting, sometimes laughing uncontrollably, with their dad. Sam and Z dove behind couches, flipped around corners, sidestepped creaky patches on the floor, even impersonated bored kids. Z almost totally lost it more than once. Sometimes Sam was too funny.

In the bathroom, Sam stood back and studied the cabinet. Z poked the objects lying around the sink, as if her mother had set an invisible trap with her toothbrush, lotions, razor, pills.

“Where is it?”

“Beneath the sink. In the cabinet. That’s where I felt it.”

Z cracked open the door and thrust her head inside. “What am I looking for?”

“It’s like a waving in the air. Like heat rising. Can’t you hear that buzzing?”

“I don’t feel anything hot or hear any bees, Samsonite.” She wiggled back out on her bony knees.

“Not that, not bees. But like it. You don’t hear anything?”

“Nope. But this place is a mess.” She fished around in the cabinet another moment and then stood up. Her hands moved quickly, arranging and rearranging their parents’ toiletries. She pressed the deodorant into the corner, rotated the vitamin bottle ninety degrees, lined the

cologne up with a comb, removed and then replaced the hand-soap. Sam watched her sister work in the mirrors.

“We don’t have time for your ODC now. She’ll know we were here.”

“OCD. And she’ll know anyway. No matter what.” She kept her eyes fixed on the sink and then went below once more. “Something’s still not right.”

Z stood again. Then she turned on the faucet and pocketed the soap pearl resting in the claws of a beaked statue her mother deemed a soapdish.

Both heard a faint crack and felt movement like a breeze streaming through two open windows on opposite sides of a house.

“You did something. The buzzing stopped.” Both sisters crouched and peered into the dark cabinet, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, they looked at each other. Sam clutched Z’s hand and said, “Ok. I’m going in for a closer look. Something’s different.”

Sam pulled herself into a compact ball and crawled into the cabinet. She could hear the water flowing in and out of the sink, the whine of the pipes pitched high. Her mind followed the plumbing back into the wall, under the house, beneath the lawn and sidewalk and street.

Z tried to fix on the red edge of her sister’s shirt, but the water flow lulled her eyes out of focus. When she looked again, Sam was gone, the cabinet empty.

“Girls, just a few minutes til dinner.” Her mother’s voice, snaking through halls and around corners to reach her, rooted in her skull. She lurched into the cabinet after her sister.

Z clutched a stack of mismatched towels on her left to steady herself. Though smaller than Sam, she wasn’t as limber. The back of her neck grazed something loose and gummy above and she fumbled forward. Then the light shifted from behind to before her and she felt a moment of lightness before she recognized Sam’s lean back crouched ahead.

“Are you ok?” Z said, tugging at the edge of Sam’s shirt.

“Quiet. Wait.”

Z peered out into a cold room, dimly lit by a distant blue light and humming with unseen machines. They were looking out from some kind of metal storage unit in a room filled with them. Z reached left to steady herself, but instead of finding towels she backhanded a row of jars. The nearest cracked against the sliding door and sloshed its rubbery contents out onto the floor, leaking some slow liquid and a bitter stink.

The air went stale, and both felt that whatever they’d opened under the sink had closed again.

“Sorry, sorry. We have to go back. Mother’s calling us.”

Sam clasped her knees and held her breath, like she did at the beginning of a race. Her blood thrummed. The last minute unfolded in her mind, and she surveyed it carefully.

“Can you fix this? I hear the buzzing again. Can you arrange things here too?”

“Maybe. I don’t really know what I did before.” Z’s voice rose and bounced off the metal paneling and out into the room. “Can you find me another jar?” she whispered.

Sam rolled out of their cabinet and raised her head just above the tableline. A labyrinth of pathways spread out around her between the cabinets and examining tables. The room had no windows but many glass doors leading to long, dim corridors, and the air was slightly damp. Deep underground, she felt. At the far end of the room, the cool glow of a screen outlined something stretched out on a tray. Something birdlike, buglike.

The door beside the terminal was half-open, and Sam heard hushed voices within. “Late the varia,” one said. She saw soft light dancing on the inner wall, as if from an aquarium. “She’s neither,” another began before dropping to a mutter. “Nor fair,” the first added.

Sam felt strangely calm and her limbs went limp, like a jellyfish moving with the tide. She knew they were about to enter and find her and her sister. She knew they would not be happy adults. Sam screwed up her courage and attacked, checking the nearest cabinet and the next and another until she finally found a similar nest of jars. They appeared jammed with coiled intestines. She snatched one and ducked back in with Z.

“Will this work?” she asked her sister.

Z’s chafed fingers felt the jar for size and shape. “I think it’s the order, not the exact objects. At least that’s how it felt the first time. I’m not sure.” She replaced the broken jar and tried returning the others to their original positions.

Sam peeked out at the floor and the far door just as four legs crossed through and over towards the computer she’d seen. “Hurry,” she said to her sister.

“I don’t know how this works!” Z said.

A machine kicked on in the back of the room and both heard clicking steps approaching.

“I know,” Sam whispered, “but we’re running out of time. Just...do like before. Put them back in order.”

Z thought of her parents’ sink and the mess around it. The memory spread out before her like the sky, and each object twinkled briefly like a star in a constellation. She saw that pattern and moved her hands without thinking.

They heard the air shift again, like an intake of breath.

“Backup now, just like you came through.” Both girls scooted backwards on their knees. Sam

pulled the cabinet door almost closed as she wiggled back, but a piece of broken glass was still lodged in the opening and she didn't have time to remove it.

The remaining vertical shaft of light switched to a warmer glow behind them and the metal coarsened to wood. Towels brushed their elbows, and then they were lying on the cool bathroom tile. There was a moment in-between that they both tried to remember. The water was still running, and they heard slow, distant footsteps but couldn't tell which side they were on.

"Close it, close it."

Z reached for the sink and knocked everything askew. Lotion tipped and dribbled onto the porcelain, and a brittle comb clinked in the sink. The water flowed down the drain, but the air was still.

Their mother's placid reflection filled the mirror.

"Girls. Dinner."

"We ran out of soap in our bathroom," Z tittered. She fished the little globe out of her pocket.

Sam agreed: "No soap."

Sam and Z both knew better than to signal to each other at the dinner table. Mother would sniff out any secret. Still, Z couldn't help flail her thin fingers under the table once or twice in search of Sam's.

"Girls, your mom is near another breakthrough." Z rearranged her corn to form a triangle.

"They're not interested in that, sweetheart." Sam fixed her eyes on three grapes suspended in jello.

"Sure they are." Their father turned and gazed at them over his glasses. "Your mother is such a brain. Where do you think you girls got it from?"

"Your father is being modest, as usual. He's just as responsible for you being in your special class. As I am."

After dinner, Sam and Z dashed to their room. There was too much to say, and they didn't know how to begin. So for a while they just lay stretched on the floor – Sam rigid and focused like a beam, Z splayed across the carpet, each limb divided against the others. Finally, they agreed to return to the bathroom the next day.

In bed that night, Sam reached out to every wall of the house, tracing all her regular footpaths and marking which corners remained unexplored. Her jaw ached, thrilled.

Z lay in paralyzed half-sleep, lost in passages within and beyond the house. Her mind drifted skyward, but the view from above offered no better perspective. She descended and called out in the dark, her voice lost and echoey, as if from a cellar. Sam thought Z was just talking in her sleep again.

The next day, they waited until their mother was up and distracted by their dad in the kitchen. Their mess had been straightened, and Z reached out to find the proper placements.

“Wait.” Sam surveyed the sink and cabinet below. “It’s gone. There’s nothing here anymore.”

“Maybe I can find a new arrangement. Just give me a minute. We still have time.”

“It doesn’t matter. There’s nothing to find. I don’t hear it anymore.” Sam kneeled and opened the cabinet door. She reached to the back. “I don’t feel it. It’s just a cabinet.”

“Did we do something? To stop it, I mean.”

“Maybe. Or someone else did. Or the other side could be out of order now. I don’t know how it works.”

Z turned the faucet on and followed the water circling down the drain. Around the sink, her parents’ toiletries looked heavy and cold, as if they’d perched there for centuries.

“Let’s check the wall on the other side,” Sam said.

That wall looked like every other in the house. They both pressed their hands and ears against it. But nothing. Z even went back and turned on the water again while Sam stayed to listen. She heard the flow, but nothing else.

“Maybe we should tell Maddy and Cleveland. They might have an idea,” Z said.

“Let’s wait until we have something to tell.”

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It wasn’t until 3 weeks later that they told Maddy and Cleveland. They were playing prison dodgeball outside beforehand. Z, as usual, was the first captured. Cleveland soon followed, but Maddy held out longer. She was determined to shame Justin. He’d been refusing a rematch since his only win against Sam and spun endless tales to classmates about that unseen victory.

Justin was a lousy shot in dodgeball, but he would do anything to avoid being hit. Maddy clinched the tendons in her neck and spit whenever Justin dove behind a larger teammate or collapsed in a graceless, but effective, heap. She waited, snarling, for an opening and didn’t see one of her own team’s prisoners aim a stray ball at the back of her ribs.

Sam, though, dodged every missile launched her way. And she shot her own balls with precise

force, without pity. Her arm was like a cannon, Cleveland said later.

Her teammates were less impressive. She was soon alone on her side of the field, seemingly unphased by the volleys from all sides, coming in waves. Peeking around the massive belly of a boy named Craig, Justin glimpsed another victory. But then they all heard the whistle, calling them inside.

Their school was a twisted complex of hallways and rooms spread out on a single floor. Maddy steered Sam, Z, and Cleveland through a side door, clear of Justin and his crew. She was describing Justin's gutless dives when Sam stopped and pressed herself against a wall.

"Oh, what this time?" Maddy said. Z shushed her and said to Sam, "Here?"

"Near."

"What's going on? Is this some twin thing? Cause Cleveland and I can leave you two to your stares and secret codes."

Sam nodded to her sister. Z said, "Listen, we'll tell you. Can you guys meet us here after school?"

"Right here? In this hallway?"

"This exact spot."

As they walked back to class, Cleveland smiled to himself. He loved secrets.

"You'd better explain that again." Maddy's arched eyebrow was waiting.

"Yeah, I don't get it either. You mean you found some kind of secret passage in your house? Like to Narnia?" Cleveland asked.

"I don't remember a creepy underground lab in Narnia, you noob! Sounds more like a hidden room."

"No, not like Narnia. And not another room *in* our house. It's hard to explain. Sam and I went somewhere. We don't know...where. Or how. We need to just show you."

"So we're going to your house now?"

"No," Sam interrupted. "It's not there anymore."

"It moves?" Cleveland asked. "No, it's closed, it's off. Maybe broken."

"But there might be another near." Z said. "Do you still feel it, Sam?"

“Follow me.”

They were in the outdated section of school that the new wings were meant to replace. Sam traced the faint hum north along a corridor papered with charcoaled statues from lost civilizations week, then west around a corner and past a janitor’s closet crammed with unused tools, then south through a hall of glassed-in trophies at least one generation old. She stopped at a heavy door to the west leading outside.

“This way.” Sam said. She stepped out into a small plot of grass enclosed on all sides by the school walls. She felt something like blood evaporating from her brain, and a thin pasty odor blended with the more familiar buzzing in her head.

“I know this place,” Cleveland said. “Teachers sometimes sneak out here to smoke.”

Z rushed into the bricked glade. “Look. Someone’s planted a miniature garden.”

“Is this it?” Maddy whined.

Sam bent low and moved toward a group of stones in the courtyard. “Here. Now it’s Z’s turn,”

Z looked up from the garden, marveling. “Oh, right.” She lurched from side to side in squatting steps, her fingers grazing the neatly trimmed bushes and squared stones. She whistled dryly to herself.

“Isn’t it past time for your afternoon feeding, Cleveland?” Maddy said. “I need something myself. You find any...tesser-snacks down there in the dirt, princess?”

Z pondered the tiny world before her. She studied a pair of rocks peering down from a small mound of earth. They perched on their hill like somebody’s lost pair of spectacles. She decided to leave them be, for now.

“Grumble, grumble. Madeleine’s starving!” Maddy said.

“Come on, enough, Mad. Give them a chance.” Cleveland said.

“A chance for what, *Cleve*? I’m still waiting for the punchline.”

“It’s not a joke. Sam doesn’t joke.”

“I know why you’re defending them.” Maddy lowered her eyes to Z, still hovering over the rocks. “It’s no secret.”

Z tossed stray arrowheads over her shoulder and scattered a few jumpy spiders lurking nearby. She appeared as if in a trance, her hands and eyes perfectly coordinated. She uncovered and tucked away two heart-shaped candygrams matted with dirt and then focused on the four largest rocks that formed a cross with the center missing. She pressed against the leftmost one, but it wouldn’t budge. Sam knelt to help her push, but Z’s second try slid the rock forward, her

bracelet clinking against the hard surface.

A faint whirlwind whipped around them. Both stared at the space left open in the middle of the rocks. Maddy went to say something but stopped.

“That’s it,” Sam said. “Ok, like before.”

“No, we have to be more careful. If something happens like last time when I broke the glass, you might get trapped. And I can’t help you from here.”

Sam considered for a moment. “Right.”

“I’ll go first and then call you guys.” Z stood and pressed the wrinkles down her shirt. Then she bent low and stepped through the space between the stones.

Everybody was watching. They were staring directly at Z and the stones. But they couldn’t describe later what exactly they saw. Z’s motion was natural and smooth. And they saw no floating door or hidden staircase or flashpuff of light and smoke. But Z was gone. And all at once. There was no edge along which she was half in, half out, one frozen arm left hanging in some vague farewell. It was as if the frames of a film were missing but without any hiccup you could see.

Maddy staggered back and Cleveland lurched forward. Sam threw out her arm. “Wait. Don’t disturb it.”

“But where is she?” Cleveland squeaked.

“I don’t know. You can see for yourself in a minute.”

Cleveland’s voice danced up and down like a child frantic to find a bathroom. “I don’t know, Sam. I don’t know.”

They waited and then Sam’s phone beeped off-key. Z’s name appeared on the screen.

“Z? Are you there?”

“It’s dark here. And cramped.”

“We’re coming.”

“Just a sec. You might close it. It’s really tight.” Cleveland leaned in to listen with Sam. “It’s not like before. The light’s different. It’s coming in through the cracks. There’s these bricks...or boxes packed together. I don’t think it’s the same place as before.”

“Are you ok?” Cleveland broke in.

“Yeah. But I bumped my head coming through. There’s not enough room to stand.”

Cleveland crouched by the rocks and looked back at Maddy, glassy-eyed and silent.

“Someone’s coming,” Z whispered.

Cleveland gasped and lost his balance and fell through the rocks. He felt the sun wink out, and his eyes filled with shadowy patches and shifting squares. He reached to steady himself, but another hand found his.

“It’s ok,” Z’s voice said. “Listen.”

As Cleveland’s eyes adjusted to the darkness, which really wasn’t so dark, he heard a distant synthesized melody high above them. It circled a simple tinny tune that was familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it. Voices behind a wall interrupted.

“Take any one you want. I’m not going to eat it.”

“What about this one?” They heard a thump and felt the wall tremble, as if it might collapse.

“Boy, this is really expensive!”

“But you said!”

“Fine, fine.” A rectangle in the wall suddenly retracted and harsh fluorescent light streamed in. Both covered their eyes. Z felt again the familiar stillness of her world and knew what her sister was about to say.

“It’s closed. Are you guys ok?”

“Yeah. Hold on.” Z said to the phone.

Z peeked between her fingers until the light stopped stinging. The small space in which she and Cleveland were lodged was illuminated now. A series of tightly packed boxes formed the facing wall. Flimsy metal girders connected the shelves above and beside them. A thin hallway ran behind, parallel to the boxes, though no one, unless they lost their third dimension, could possibly pass through it.

On the nearest box, Cleveland could just make out a maze and maybe the words – Can YOU find ALL of TREASURES? And somewhere below: FREE GIFT INSIDE! He reached toward the words and accidentally knocked the box outward.

“Don’t touch anything!” Z whispered through her teeth. “Don’t move.”

She craned her neck out through the now sizeable hole in the wall. To her right, a small boy clutching the original displaced box trailed his mother and her cart. She almost cried out to him when the rest of the aisle and cereal and pop tarts surrounding them came into focus.

“Oh,” Z said and crawled out.

“What is it?” Cleveland asked.

Z looked back at his patchy red cheeks and bright eyes peering out from between boxes of Golden Grahams and Lucky Charms. She started to giggle then stifle then completely lose it as Cleveland’s chubby, quizzical face looked on. Z bent over, breathless, dizzy, a royal ache in her throat. Cleveland tumbled out to help and cereal boxes followed, like dominos.

“Hey!” A bulldoggish woman in a dark green apron glared at them from the other end of the aisle and then gripped her mop and raised it like a spear.

Z yanked Cleveland up and tugged him in the opposite direction. They dashed up and down aisles, past beef jerky and scented candles, around corner displays and under a ladder bearing a skinny stockboy whose hair hung in greasy clumps, like the wilted arms of a beached octopus. Z was laughing the whole way, tears streaked back across her temples, but Cleveland feared that the hand of a grouchy employee would at any moment reach out from a shelf and drag them away.

“Don’t we need to get back?” Cleveland asked.

“Not the way we came. Come on.” Z clasped Cleveland’s hand and pulled him into another sprint. He hoped his hand wasn’t sweating too much. Trailing behind her, their fingers the only link tethering them together, it was like, like...Cleveland couldn’t say. He wanted to grab a piece of Tupperware they’d just passed to use as a container for his heart, in case it escaped him.

Finally, Z stopped in front of a row of raspberry and blueberry power drinks. Cleveland bent over, wheezing and clutching his side. He was dying for a drink, but he realized, looking down at his shoes, that he didn’t have enough money on him.

“Are you guys ok?” Z’s phone said.

“We’re good.” Z smiled and raised her eyebrows at Cleveland.

“Yeah...we’re...good,” he agreed, panting. “What about...you guys?”

“We were run out by the assistant principal.” Sam said.

“Probably there to smoke. That’s why she didn’t boss us much or even follow us out,” Maddy added.

“You ok, Maddy?” Cleveland asked.

“Of course I am, jelly belly!”

Z said flatly, “We’re at the supermarket. We need to figure a way home. Any ideas?” Everybody was silent. The only sound all four could hear on both sides of the phone was the whistling in Cleveland’s nose. He was still out of breath.

Then he said, "I have...an idea."

"You know," Maddy broke in. "Finding a secret passage to the supermarket is kind of lame."

Cleveland grinned at Z and said, "Welcome back, Maddy."

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They all met up at Sam and Z's house an hour later. Cleveland had called their dad and explained that his mom'd dropped them off after school but then there'd been a mix-up about who was picking them up and would it be ok if he came to get them when he was free but no rush because he and Z didn't mind waiting. Adults always believed Cleveland.

When Cleveland and Z got to her room, Maddy took a few steps back, as if they might be somehow contaminated.

"We're just the same as before," Cleveland said, waving his hand in front of Maddy.

"How do I know that? Can you explain what just happened?" Maddy asked.

Sam closed the bedroom door as Z said, "Well, I think you can rule out Narnia for sure now."

Cleveland studied his own extended hand as if it were a stranger's.

"Was it like before?" Sam asked Z.

"Going through, yes. Of course it was a different place. But the objects, the opening, the closing – it felt the same. Even the in-between." Z replied calmly.

"There's something in-between?" Maddy sputtered, backing further away from Cleveland.

"Not really," Cleveland said. "Just this feeling, this lightness. Like...that moment in the air when you hop over a puddle." Maddy wrinkled her nose, as if that made no sense. "But there's no hallway or tunnel, if that's what you mean."

"But there's something, so you could still get caught in between, right? If both sides closed before you were through." Maddy pulled her thin dark arms tight across her stomach.

Sam and Z looked at each other, and Cleveland snapped, "It's not like that."

"You don't know that! Or what if the other side was in the middle of the ocean? How long would you last in the world minus your arm thingies?" Maddy knew he hadn't worn his floaties in years. Then she suddenly imagined the other result of an open passage like she described: the endless waters rushing back through to their side.

"Why are you so scared?" Cleveland asked.

“Why are you so not?” Maddy answered.

“Stop.” Sam said. “We don’t know enough yet. We need more information.”

Z nodded. “Yeah. Let’s see if we can find any useful links online.”

They googled secret passages, hidden doors, teleportation, even space itself. They didn’t find any reports of similar experiences, but they did learn other things. They read about Janus, the god of doors and gates, and Hecate, goddess of thresholds and queen of ghosts. They scanned an article about the quantum entanglement of particles across great distances. They perused half a rant on how the complexity of the universe is not uniform, citing the human brain as a particularly dense cubic half-foot amidst mostly empty space.

Their necks and eyes started to ache, all crammed together in front of the screen. Cleveland started a new search on the secret order of the universe while the others took a break.

“Listen to this,” Cleveland said a few minutes later. He began to read aloud, “Such is the nature of the earth as a whole and of the things that are upon it. In the earth itself, all over its surface, there are many hollow regions, some deeper and more widely spread than that in which we live, others deeper than our region but with a smaller expanse, some both shallower than ours and broader. All these are joined together underground by many connecting channels...”

“What’s that from?” Z asked.

“Something called *Phaedo*.”

“Wait, this wasn’t underground. It was right out in the open!” Maddy said.

“Maybe it doesn’t mean literally underground.” Cleveland skipped ahead. “...All this movement to and fro is caused by an oscillation inside the earth, and this oscillation is brought about by natural means, as follows.”

There was a gentle knock on the door, and Sam and Z’s father called them into the hallway.

“Scoot over, professor.” Maddy snatched the keyboard and hurriedly googled obsessive-compulsive disorder and hallucinations.

“What are you doing?” Cleveland protested. “You know it’s real. You saw it yourself!”

“I don’t know what I saw. And none of it excludes the wonder twins from being completely nuts. They got us into this.” She clicked a link on schizophrenia. “This one’s for me too. I want to make sure it’s not contagious.”

Sam and Z returned from the hall. “We don’t have much time,” Z said. “Our mother will be up soon.”

“And why is it that she sleeps all the time?” Maddy asked while discreetly closing her tabs.

“Her work at the lab,” Z started to explain, but Sam overtook her, “We don’t have much time.”

No one moved. No one knew what to do next.

Cleveland said, “I was thinking on the ride over: what if the world is like a house? A huge house with many many rooms. And most of the hallways and paths we know. But some we don’t. Just like secret passages in an old house. Most of the time we have to go around, like it was designed, through the hallways and doors. Just like in this house. Even though the TV room is right here...” He knocked on Sam and Z’s wall. “We still have to go through the door, down the hall, around the corner. To our bodies, the TV room is not right here.” Cleveland knocked on the wall again.

“You mean that really the supermarket is right beside the courtyard of the school. We just can’t reach it directly without going through the...” Z looked to where Cleveland’s hand had just been, “wall.”

“Nice theory, nerd alert. But what’s outside the house? What if I look out the window or open the front door?” Maddy asked

“There is no outside the house,” Cleveland said. “And no front door.”

“And who made these secret doors between rooms? The same person who built the house?”

“I just said the world is *like* a house. Nobody made the world. It’s like a met-a-phor, Maddy.”

“It’s *like* a simile, dummy.”

“The world is a metaphor,” Z said in her far-off voice.

“Oh great. Now we’ve lost her again.” Maddy stretched her neck and clinched her jaw. “Sam, could you please bring your sister back to our world?” Sam took Z’s hand, and Maddy glared at Cleveland. “Whether it’s a metaphor or not.”

Z blinked twice and said, “Or maybe the world just isn’t as...continuous...as we think. Maybe it’s more like scattered islands. And you can jump between them. If you know how.”

“That might explain why Z can do...well, whatever it is she does. Since she sees things, objects, um, fragments...she sees them differently.”

“He means that your little magic trick, your majesty...” Maddy paused and studied Cleveland’s reddening cheeks. “Anyway, what’s the point? I mean, if we want a twinkie after P.E., I guess we know where to go now.”

They heard a distant creak somewhere in the house and then heavy, plodding steps on hardwood floor. Sam moved in front of the door. “Listen, we’re out of time. No more theories or jokes. We’re only going to understand better by seeking more like them. We found these without looking. But now we search. The one here at our house and the one at school are

closed; they're out, for now. I want to go back to that pipe, where we had the race. I want to see it again."

"But I already looked," Cleveland said. "They covered it up. It's in someone's house now."

"I still want to go there. That's the first time I felt it." Sam looked at each of them with her hard blue eyes. "Let's meet here Saturday morning.

And be sure not to tell anybody."

"What about Alis?" Z asked. "I just talked to her the other night. She's one of our Landale cousins – we can trust her." Maddy's eyes widened, as if she just realized that she was really involved. Z went on: "Besides, she lives so far away. She might as well be on another planet, in a whole other system!"

"Listen, you took a risk telling us. Especially Cleveland. You know he's just bursting to tell everyone he knows."

"I am not!"

"Let's just keep this to ourselves for now," Maddy said. She looked from side to side with her shoulders hunched up and then whispered, "You start just telling one person and then: here comes everybody!"

~ ~ ~

Sam and Z's mother caught them before they left Saturday morning.

"Where are you girls going?"

Sam's yellow-orange jacket flared out at the shoulders and was made of a shiny material that glinted like armor. Z wore a simple green dress. They looked at each other and then their shoes.

"Now, there will be no secrets around here." She was dressed in her lab coat. She wasn't supposed to be awake.

"I know," she started, but then her phone blared. She said, "We'll have a little talk later. Once I come back."

They passed their father too as he was coming in with groceries. He said, "Have fun, SZ!" and chuckled to himself. He always did that whenever he said the first letters of their names together. They never asked him to explain the joke.

When all four arrived at the construction site, there wasn't much construction left. Identical paneled homes stood waiting for families. Some interiors still lay spilled out on half-rolled

lawns. An occasional toy in a flowerbed or giant vehicle in a driveway suggested life inside others.

Someone was already there when they arrived, sitting on a tree stump, staring at the now finished structure that had previously housed their obstacle course. It was Justin, and he didn't notice them until they were within sniffing range of Cleveland's spicysweet cologne.

He turned only slightly and Maddy said, "So, finally ready for a rematch, Bailey? And no cheating this time!"

"I didn't cheat," Justin said quietly. "It's not my fault she just stopped." Sam was standing right beside Maddy, but Justin didn't look at her.

"That's not what you told everybody!" Z grabbed Maddy's clinched fist and held her steady. "He's here replaying the memory of his great victory – it's pathetic. Pathetic! Everybody knows..."

"It's not my fault!" Justin turned to face the four of them. They could see that his left eye was swollen shut. Blood oozed from a crusted cut in his eyebrow. "It's not my fault she had some...some girl problem!"

"Now *you* have a girl problem," Maddy hissed and shook her fist free of Z.

"Let it go, Maddy," Sam said. She took a step toward Justin, but he still wouldn't look at her. "Justin won. There'll be no rematch."

Justin's face tightened as he backed away. "I could beat you bitches anytime!" Cleveland stepped out from behind the other three. "And you too," Justin squealed. "You...you...bitch's bitch!" He darted into the trees.

"Great. He lives to fight another day! I don't get you guys. He one-upped us again." Maddy plopped down on the now vacant stump.

"Come on, Maddy. Overlook it, just this once," Cleveland said. "I've been called worse. And remember why we're here."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. The mystic shortcuts! Where to this time? The dry cleaner? No, the post office! You know, I was doing just fine with the longcuts."

"It's not here anymore," Sam said.

"Not at all? Should we get closer?" Z asked.

"No, it wouldn't matter. I think I'm getting better at sensing them. At filtering out all the other noise." Sam scanned the new houses nearby. "I'm sure. There's nothing here."

"So what now?" Maddy asked.

“We search!” Cleveland said. “Like Sam said before. We can’t return to the first one now. And the others were accidents. So we go exploring! I brought supplies.” He carefully placed his briefcase beside Maddy on the stump and began fiddling with the combination lock. “Flashlights. Spyglass. Compass.”

“How very high-tech, Columbus. A regular Italian explorer.”

“And I brought snacks too.”

“Of course you did.”

They began to search the area, though they weren’t exactly sure where to go. Suburbs stretched in every direction and the twisting streets of patterned houses quickly became a maze. Whenever they found a landmark – the reservoir, the number two fairway, the one still-vacant lot – they slowed down and raised their eyebrows to Sam. Each time, she shook her head.

“So many houses and yards. We need to make a map. You know, so we know where we’ve been.” Cleveland said.

“Maybe we need to get beyond all this,” Z said. “I think there’s an animal sanctuary a few miles that way.” She pointed. “And farmland beyond the new developments.”

Maddy groaned. “Wait wait wait. Let’s make sure we haven’t missed anything here first.”

They spent the rest of the morning walking the nearby neighborhoods and trading theories. They decided there wasn’t much evidence for time travel, unless just seconds. Nor did they think they’d traveled to any parallel universes. They asked each other lots of secret questions to be sure.

“Maybe you guys died,” Maddy said, smirking. “And then you respawned.”

“We’re not dead!” Cleveland cried.

“And I’m the only one really still alive.”

“Stop it!”

“How many lives do you guys have?”

“Maddy!”

“Zombies.”

The sky began to darken in the west. They circled back and stopped at one of the only old homes near Sam and Z’s. It predated their subdivision and stood at a ninety degree angle to the road, its front and back doors facing the neighbors. It was the closest thing in the area to a haunted house.

“What about here?” Cleveland asked, still steaming.

“Nothing,” Sam said.

Simon, a pale kid who lived there with some ancient relative, trudged across the yard towards them. His ratty hair clung to his skull, and he was dressed all in muddy browns. He held a frayed jumprope by one end.

“What’s the score? Who’s winning?” he asked.

“Move along, kid.” Maddy said.

“What is it? I want to play too.”

“We’re not playing a game,” Cleveland explained. Simon looked confused.

“You smell like death, kid.” Maddy said. She glanced sideways at Cleveland. “Aren’t little boys supposed to smell nice?”

“No.” Simon said.

“Well, get along, you whippersnapper!” Maddy barked, conjuring her best crone, but the boy just stood there, blinking slowly.

“Maybe when you’re older, Simon.” Z said.

They left the boy in his yard and meandered slowly back towards Sam and Z’s.

“That kid was right. This is a game. A stupid game.” Maddy said. Sam and Z began to whisper to each other.

“It’s not stupid, Maddy. Come on, we just need to be patient. These things can’t be easy to find or else everybody would’ve found them already.”

“Bathrooms and cereal aisles aren’t exactly hidden. They’re right there, right in your face!”

“But not everybody can see them.” Cleveland squinted so that everything blurred around the edges of his eyelids. There was Maddy fuming. There were Sam and Z, still whispering. There were the dark clouds now, creeping closer. The fine hair on his thick arms pricked up in the breeze. He loved that delicious anticipation before a storm.

But he felt more than that this time. It had been building inside him for a while. When the credits washed over him after a really good movie. When he glimpsed his own outline in the television screen. When he was deep in a book and then he suddenly saw himself from the side or overhead, reading.

It was this new feeling, when the world seemed so...full. He looked around and every corner

seemed to be hiding a secret. Beyond every edge, every surface – of that leaning telephone pole, of his too-small wristwatch, of Z's hair – something lay waiting. He could feel it.

Cleveland began to walk away from them. Maddy cried out and dashed to catch up.

“Wait, wait. I can't deal with those two alone. Come on, we're the *real* people here. Not like the super something sisters back there.”

“We can't stop now. We have to keep looking.”

“For what? Z's lost Doritos?” Cleveland turned away, but Maddy grabbed his arm. “Listen, I'll play along, Cleveland. Just stay sane for me, ok?”

Sam and Z rejoined them just as thin stinging rain began to fall. Maddy took off, not towards Sam and Z's house, but in the opposite direction. Cleveland grinned and pursued her, and the sisters followed. Maddy slid down an incline just off the road that led to a drainage ditch. She ducked into a broad, corrugated tunnel beneath the street and waited.

“Let's stay here til the rain lightens up,” she said to the others once they arrived. “Then we'll continue the search.”

Sam suddenly straightened her back and looked into the tunnel. “Maybe we won't have to wait,” Z said. “Where is it, Sam?”

She pointed to a large, moss-covered pipe jutting from the wall and leading further under the street. “Through there.”

They all walked slowly over to the horizontal pipe and peered in. It opened into a larger chamber that stretched beneath the road. They could see loose brickwork that looked much older than the houses above. Water slid down the walls, and dim light from grated gutters lay in pools further down the passage.

“Thanks, Maddy! You did it!” Cleveland bellowed, louder than he'd intended. The echo vibrated through the entire tunnel.

“Great. Underground.” Maddy said. “Kill me.”

“Let's stay close together so we don't get lost,” Z said.

Sam ducked in first, though the pipe was nearly big enough to take her standing. Once they were all inside, Cleveland passed one of his flashlights to Sam in front and kept the other for himself in the back. The ground was soft in places and he swept the light from side to side to reveal clusters of mean-looking brown mushrooms. Ahead, Sam shone her light on groups of rocks, and then the rocks moved.

“Careful,” she said. Cleveland stepped onto something hard and rounded and bounced forward. It hissed.

“Turtles,” Z said. Their lights reflected off of tiny eyes hiding in shells, and they could see slow, almost drunken movements in the dark corners.

“These turtles don’t look right,” Maddy said. “How much further, Sam?”

“Not far. It should be just ahead.”

Sam pressed forward and the others followed, hopping between safe spots. Lost coins sparkled amidst clumps of mud and leaves, but they didn’t stop to collect them.

At the end of the chamber, they found another pipe that started level but then angled upward ninety degrees, the vertical end disappearing into the ceiling. Just before the pipe, what appeared to be an old elevator shaft fell away from the bricks. They could all hear water rushing far below as they stepped around it.

“It’s that way,” Sam said, pointing to the pipe at the dead-end.

“Let me guess,” Maddy deadpanned. “This is not a pipe.”

“No, it is. Beyond it.”

“But this is the end of the passage. Oh well, guess it’s time to go home.”

Sam climbed onto the pipe and scanned the bricks where it connected to the ceiling. They could all see a dark recess at the top of the elevator shaft, perhaps a crawl space. Sam jumped a couple times until she managed to knock a few bricks away. Then she retreated to the open tip of the pipe and began to both run and jump in a single motion, bouncing slightly off the wall and grasping a firmer ledge above.

As Sam hoisted herself up, Maddy asked, “Where’d she learn that trick?” Z shrugged.

Sam’s lean arms dangled from the dark ceiling, and she said, “Come on, I’ll pull you up.”

They suddenly felt a tremor rattle the chamber and then heard a distant roar. They all scrambled to reach Sam’s hands. Cleveland was the last up, and everybody had to help.

“What was that?”

“Maybe those turtles have a mean ole Daddy,” Maddy said, laughing with relief. “But for real – they didn’t look right.”

Sam crawled ahead into the darkness. She wasn’t far past the tunnel wall they’d left behind when she stopped and said, “It’s below us.”

They shined their flashlights through another hole into a room below. Before they could discuss anything, Sam dropped in. “Are you ready?” Z asked Cleveland and Maddy.

They joined Sam below, in the room beyond the dead-end. It had no doors, or any other ways in. It was cleaner than the tunnel outside and didn't appear to have had visitors in a long time. Three large green pipes extended up from the floor.

Sam circled and studied each pipe. "It's one of these? Like the first time at the race?" Cleveland asked.

"It's all of them." Sam said.

Z placed her hands on one, then another. "Yes, it is."

"You mean you have to fiddle with all of them?"

"No, I mean there are three here. To three different places."

Cleveland gaped. "It's like Grand Central Station!"

Z found little to work with. Each pipe had a few small valves attached to it and not much else. She looked down into one, but the flashlight couldn't reach the bottom. "Can you tell any differences between them, Sam?"

Sam's eyes were closed. "They each feel slightly different. A different sound. That one," she pointed to the pipe nearest Maddy and Cleveland, "is the most familiar. Like the others we found. I'd guess it goes somewhere nearby. But this one," she nodded to the pipe beside her, "is totally different. A different pitch or frequency or something. I think it goes somewhere else. Somewhere very far away."

"Maybe the other side of the world!" Cleveland sputtered.

"Then let's try it." Z said. "They seem stable on this end. There's little for me to arrange, and that means less that can be disturbed."

"But what if you still get stuck?" Cleveland said, withdrawing his excitement. "And end up somewhere dangerous? How could we save you so far away?"

"Haven't you noticed, Cleveland? Sam and I don't really need saving." Z said. She went to the far pipe and started to turn the valves slowly, her face sideways against the metal as if she were cracking a safe.

Cleveland felt that everything was about to change. For just a moment he could see all four of them there with the pipes, from that new distance. He pleaded with his eyes for Maddy to do something. But she knew there was no stopping them.

The stale air stirred in the little room.

Z stepped back and said, "Ok. It's ready."

“But we’re not!” Cleveland said.

“Come on,” Z said gently. “What did we come here for?” She took Cleveland’s hand.

“But...but...it’s dangerous to go alone! Take this.” Cleveland dug into his bag and pulled out a small plastic star pin. “For luck. I won it when I was little. I used to feel...invincible, when I carried it.” Z cupped the star in her hands.

“Just remember,” Maddy said to Sam, “if anything goes wrong: get out fast!”

“We’ll go together this time,” Z said. She climbed up onto the lip of the pipe.

“The pipe is big enough for two at once,” Sam agreed, joining her.

Maddy raised her voice. “Ok, everybody now: 1-2...”

Jump!

*~ Mianyang, Sichuan ~
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